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ABSTRACT

Adult learning at Penn State, New Kensington Campus, is discussed. The history of adult continuing education is presented, noting the precedent for adults to attend college was set after World War II. The 1980s has been a decade where the trickle of adult students has become a flood with the addition of adult women returning to campuses across the nation. At Penn State, the core of the aggregate of adults has always been the Adults on Campus Club, the catalyst for most of the significant changes designed to address adult needs. Adults have always been able to retain their unique identity and have also been encouraged to be involved in the total fabric of Penn State's campus academic and social tapestry. This club has formed the basis for an adult support group. It had also established the Goal Post, a student center that combines the functions of advising, counseling, and remediation. The Goal Post is the focal point of student academic life at the campus. Adults on-campus have helped create and establish unique adult orientations, adult brochures, and honor societies. Adults pushed for more comprehensive, computerized financial aid packages addressing the needs of returning adults. They also helped establish an emergency student loan. Most of the adults excel academically. They have received a long list of awards and recognitions in recent years. Adults currently serve as academic and social role models for the more traditional students who have high levels of motivation. They are involved in wide-ranging future projects like writing grants and developing extended degrees for location-bound adults. (SM)

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ADULT LEARNERS ON CAMPUS: A CELEBRATION OF PROGRESS (TOGETHER WE CAN)

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INTRODUCTION

CHANGES IN DEMOGRAPHICS

Metamorphosis

I came,
walked halls
of learning and advance.
Questioned,
should I begin
would I fit in
could I succeed?
Feared
I shouldn't
wouldn't
couldn't,
..... But I did.

Cora Lee Scott
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The precedent for adults to attend college was set in the not too recent past. It began after World War II when returning Vets, who had been forced to defend their country, were offered the GI Bill. Society, especially our economic institutions, needed more educated persons in virtually every occupational area. We were already entering the Post Industrial era (Toffler,1980). We needed more scientists, technicians, educators (The Baby Boom), communications experts (Mass Media), professionals, bureaucratic managers, service workers, etc. This precedent was further encouraged by the collapse of the Blue-Collar Class as heavy industry was exported to under-developed countries in the 1970's. The 1980's has been a decade where this trickle of adult students has become a flood with the addition of adult women returning to campuses across the nation.

Penn State, New Kensington Campus, is simply a microcosm of this national trend. Currently 48% of our total enrollment (688 out of 1420 students) are 23 years of age or older. Further, 36.8% of our total student body, excluding the graduate student aggregate, are 23 years of age or older. This translates to 437 students out of a total of 1168.

TOGETHER WE HAVE: PAST ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The core or nucleus of this aggregate of adults has always been the Adults on Campus Club. Formed approximately ten years ago, this club has been the catalyst for most of the significant changes designed to address adult needs at our campus. The administrative and faculty position in relation to adults has always been to strike an equilibrium between a recognizable identity for adults and yet, at the same time, to blend or integrate these adults into the campus. The result of this approach is that the adults have been able to retain their unique identity and also have been encouraged to become involved in the total fabric of the campus academic and social tapestry.

The advisors of the Adults on Campus (A.O.C.) Club have actively encouraged and sought club members to survey, articulate and advocate for adult causes. In turn, the faculty and administration have often been responsive to these urgings for change. The consequence of this process is a tripartite involvement (e.g. students, faculty and administration) all working for constructive changes that have more functionally met adult needs.

One of the key accomplishments of this group relates to retention. The Adults on Campus Club has, from its inception, formed the basis for a support group, where adults concerned about their academic skills, their children, their occupational potential, their marriages, etc. could discuss, encourage and direct each other to offices, departments, or outside agencies that might assist them. This network of concern and support has been mentioned several times as the key to specific adults remaining alive academically. Thus retention and helping people is a happy serendipitous consequence of the A.O.C. group.

A second major accomplishment, encouraged by the Adults on Campus club, was the establishment of the Goal Post (aptly named by our students). Agitation for the establishment of a student center that would combine and integrate the functions of advising, counseling and remediation began as early as fifteen years ago by the current advisors of the AOC's (Adults on Campus). This dream came to fruition approximately five years ago, again with the support and encouragement of adults.

The Goal Post has become the focal point of student academic life at our campus. In fact, an independent program evaluator for our Title III Grant (Federal grant for developing institutions) has been so impressed with the unique blend of services (e.g. academic, remedial, advising, counseling, career assessment, diagnosis, personnel and students) that he has referred to it as the "heart-beat" of the campus. He has also suggested that we use the Goal Post as a show-case for other colleges, both those that are aspiring

for and those that have received Title III funding as model for retention. A significant proportion of our adults use the services of the Goal Post to assist themselves with myriad of personal and academic problems.

From this core of involvement in the Campus Community, the adults have spread out into every facet of campus life. They are involved in student government, student groups (i.e. the Computer Club, the Spanish Club, etc.), strategic planning for the campus, recruitment and hiring of campus personnel, etc. There is no component of campus life that has not been enriched by adult students at our campus.

Further, adults have helped create and establish unique adult orientations, adult brochures, an adult-faculty Christmas appreciation lunch, honor societies, and "bring a friend day" (recruitment). Adults from the A.O.C.'s Club help to plan, implement and maintain the only active Day Care Cooperative on any of the Commonwealth Campuses. Adults have pushed for more comprehensive, computerized financial aid packages that address returning adult needs as well as traditional student needs. Adults were instrumental in establishing an emergency student loan to assist students with such problems as money for books, transportation, etc. Adults have also pooled their meager resources together on several occasions to assist fellow students through crisis situations (e.g. repair loans for cars, hospital emergencies, loss of home items through fire, etc.). This is only a partial list of the tangible, extrinsic accomplishments. There is indeed, no way to measure the effect on a person's sense of worth when they realize that they can accomplish, they can grow and they can function even in the face of personal tragedies. We need to assess the contributions of these adults to higher education and society when we complain that they themselves are a very needy and costly aggregate in terms of services to any campus.

TOGETHER WE ARE: CURRENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

If this litany of accomplishments leads one to believe that our adults would rest upon their laurels, the assumption is incorrect.

Most of the returning adults excell academically. Their high degree of motivation causes them to consistently stand at or near the top of their classes. This creates higher standards for traditional students and often challenges faculty to answer the difficult and probing questions they frequently ask. Their viewpoints and life experiences add a dimension to the classroom that reinforces, and occasionally contradicts, the instruction given.

Because of their drive to succeed, they frequent the tutors, form study groups and request test stress workshop sessions, then take places as peer tutors to other students.

One tangible result of all this work is the list of awards and recognitions adult learners have garnered in recent years. Since 1985, five students have won the PAACE award. Last spring a returning adult won the coveted Eric Walker Award, while another won the President's Freshman Award. Their names grace the Who's Who in American Junior Colleges rolls, and of the recently established honors fraternities, Phi Theta Kappa has 77% and Tau Alpha Pi has 50% non-traditional student members. The executive board of Phi Theta Kappa is made up entirely of students over 23.

One 38 year old student entered his freshman year with a 1.7 Q.P.A. from high school. He took every remedial course available and then moved up. He is now tutoring other students in the Goal Post and sits on the Advisory Board of the Learning Center. He is President of Phi Theta Kappa. No one knows what he will tackle next. Perhaps he will do as others have already done - go on to higher degrees and return to Penn State as a faculty member.

Most recently adults have agitated for University-wide recognition of their needs within the Penn State system. The President has responded by conducting a University wide survey of adult needs as a basis for implementing changes in the University's approach to these adults.

Our adults not only were involved in that agitation but they have also found time to write a special grant called "Rust-Remover" which has been funded by the University. The basic purpose of seminars outlined in the proposal will be to run pre-entrance sessions for adults to relieve anxiety with such topics as: Stress Management; Relieving Test Anxiety; Financial Aid, etc.

TOGETHER WE WILL: FUTURE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The evidence of accomplishments also extends into the leadership roles of the campus. Adults currently serve as academic and social role models for the more traditional students who have high levels of motivation. There is a symbiotic relationship where these two groups study together, tutor each other in the Goal Post or in any convenient nook, support and nurture each other and work together on various projects to assist the campus.

Even as this paper is being prepared, adults are requesting time-line flexibility in our Associate Degree Programs (designed basically for traditional students) which lock adults into an unrealistic (two-year) time sequence. The argument is that most adults with the problems attendant to be an adult (e.g. families, children, work, financial crises, etc.) cannot be realistically expected to finish a two year degree in two years. Adults are also fighting for the extension of the last two years of specific degrees (i.e. business, mechanical engineering technology, etc.) for location-bound persons who wish to remain within the Penn State system.

Adults are also involved in such wide-ranging future projects as writing grants to video-tape courses, development of summer pre-college classes for adults to relieve anxiety about entering academic life to the development of associate degrees (i.e. Materials Science; Hotel, Restaurant, Institutional Management; etc.) and the development of extended degrees (four year degrees) for location-bound adults (i.e. business and liberal arts).

In conclusion, to the extent that institutions of higher education open their doors and encourage adults to actively participate in the campus community and governance is the extent to which these institutions are enriched. Together we "have", "can", and "will".

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